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The Theme of Escape in
Ragtime by E.L.
Doctorow and
A Farewell to Arms by
Ernest Hemingway

Rabia Choudry

The theme of escape in the American novel no longer parallels colonial America and the exploration of the frontier. Sam Bluefarb describes this previous theme in *The Escape Motif in the American Novel* by stating that, "Although the theme of flight may be seen in other literatures, it is only in American literature, particularly the American novel, that the preoccupation begins to loom large, begins to represent what is most characteristically American—the urge to be forever wandering into new territories...to be on the move..." (Bluefarb 7). This characterization has been modified to read, "the very urge to escape—after the Civil War especially, but most especially in the twentieth century—was born out of desperation and hopelessness, so that escape finally became not so much an act of hope, optimism, and...self-reliance as of hopelessness and confusion" (Bluefarb 3). In accordance with the latter of these two ideas are many of the characters of *Ragtime* and Frederic Henry of *Farewell to Arms*. As Sinclair Lewis once said, "In a passionate escape there must be not only a place from which to flee but a place to which to flee" (Bluefarb iii). Incorporating this into their novels *Ragtime* and *Farewell to Arms*, E.L. Doctorow and Ernest Hemingway have developed a theme of escape which suggests that people choose very different forms of escape depending upon their particular situation. Each author has enhanced his theme through a simple writing style. The simple sentences refer to the characters' regression to a childlike state as a means of escape. The authors aspire to portray the futility of life if one refuses to deal with its trials and tribulations.

The character who establishes the theme in *Ragtime* is Harry Houdini, a famous escape artist. Houdini entertains his audiences by defying death, so that "death is the end point and origin of [his quest]" (Morris 107). His art, as well as his name, are his forms of escape, for Houdini's name was originally Eric Weiss. He learns that his pseudonym cannot help him to escape. His only escape from his life is through death, and not through the dramatic portrayal of it. He also learns, after his mother dies, that no one can escape the finality of death. "Like Houdini, the narrator demonstrates that both writer and reader, performer and audience, are escape artists. It is as if the attempt to represent must necessarily delude with the false promise of escape in the face of necessity" (Morris 108-9). And there definitely is a need for escape, an escape from the conditions and realities of "this time in history...too many lived to a room. There was no sanitation. The streets reeked of shit. Children died of mild colds and slight rashes. Children

died on beds made of two kitchen chairs pushed together. They died on floors...." (Doctorow 18).

The middle to lower class who lived in these slums during pre-World War I America would have envied Mother's Younger Brother of *Ragtime*. He lives with his sister in her New Rochelle home, and takes part in her portrayal of the American dream. He leads a simple life working for his brother-in-law making bombs. Eventually, he too must learn about the "false promise of escape." After he and Evelyn Nesbit have a very passionate love affair, she deserts him. Doctorow describes Younger Brother's need to escape from this situation: "He stood between the milk cars going up to New Rochelle. He considered throwing himself under the wheels. He listens to their rhythm, their steady clacking, like the left hand of a rag. The screeching and pounding of metal on metal where the first two cars joined was the syncopating right hand. It was a suicide rag...." (Doctorow 170). At the time, Mother's Younger Brother does not realize that the only escape from his life is death also. He searches for another means of escape and finds himself amidst the gang of Coalhouse Walker, Jr., who is a black man infuriated by the way he and his property are treated by the firemen of the Emerald Isle firehouse. Younger Brother is willing to suffer the reputation of being a white man in a black gang, for the sake of fleeing his former life. Following a long period of making demands and attacking the firehouse, Walker and his gang occupy the famous J.P. Morgan library. "After the fire chief, Willie Conklin (the craven racist responsible for the entire affair), is forced to rebuild Walker's Ford in front of the Morgan library, the police allow the little band of Walker's followers to escape in return for his surrender...." (Harter 52). As Walker is about to surrender to his own execution, Younger Brother says, "What you are doing is betraying us. Either we all ought to go free or we all ought to die" (Doctorow 304). He realizes he will have to leave if Walker dies and also exhibits his envy of Walker's successful escape. After Walker is shot, Younger Brother has no choice but to flee once again.

"Younger Brother successfully escapes even farther south, eventually ending up amidst the Mexican Revolution where, fighting for Zapata he is finally killed" (Harter 52). Harter and Thompson consider Younger Brother's release from punishment a "successful escape." However, this "success" leads him to flee once more. As Lewis said, there must be a "place to which to flee," implying a place from which one should not have to escape.

Eventually both Mother's Younger Brother and Coalhouse Walker find this place: death. Coalhouse, too, spends his entire life in flight. "Inheriting a history of neglect, abuse, and exploitation, Coalhouse Walker embodies the claims of a new history upon America, especially upon the middle class as represented by Mother and Father" (Parks 10). Critics often refer to him as the anachronism of the ragtime era. They see him as a late 1960s black radical. Jeffrey Hart characterizes him as a "consistently admirable character" and as a "ragtime piano player who, after being victimized by some white toughs, becomes a violent revolution-

ary" (Hart 892-3). Walker appears, to these critics as one who favors his race and one who would accept his race's support in a time of need. This view is the antithesis of Father's beliefs. In Father's mind, Walker neglects his own race: "It occurred to father one day that Coalhouse didn't know he was a negro. The more he talked about this the more true it seemed. Walker didn't act or talk like a colored man. He seemed to be able to transform the customary deference practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's" (Doctorow 168).

Walker's role in the novel clarifies the meaning of the title for the reader as Harry Houdini elucidates the theme. He is an African-American who has escaped the stereotype of his race. He has received an education and is a ragtime pianist. "Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast...." is how Scott Joplin explains the ragtime era. His explanation demonstrates how the theme of escape can be expanded to include regression. The moral here would be not to let childhood pass by too quickly. Regression is a defense mechanism by which one reverts to a childlike state of mind. This is effectively portrayed through the simple sentences in the book. The novel can be read very quickly, like a children's storybook. "It may seem to the hasty reader who has ignored the injunction not to play this piece fast" that a kind of surface Dick-and-Jane-and-Spot prose has been utilized to increase the reader's sense of the childlike atmosphere of the time (Grumbach 42). John Parks claims that the narrator of the novel is the little boy, the son of the simply named Mother and Father, who is now grown up. Parks describes the ragtime era to which he wishes he could return: "...as the little boy's book, the novel is the result of the warning from the present read into the past. The present, of course, knows what the past does not. The warning therefore functions as a hidden clue to a possible destiny...." (Parks 64), perhaps the destiny of reverting back to childhood.

Simple sentences are used in both novels to enhance the complex concept of regression. Frederic Henry, too, reverts to a childlike state in *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway. Henry's regression is also enhanced by a simple writing style. Hemingway's novels, like those of Doctorow, flow like music. In this particular passage, Frederic Henry speaks in simple sentences about his regression: "'Don't talk about the war,' I said. The war was a long way away. Maybe there was no war. Then I realized it was over for me. But I did not have the feeling that it was really over. I had the feeling of a boy who thinks of what is happening at a certain hour at the schoolhouse from which he has played truant" (Hemingway 245).

Because Frederic Henry flees the war throughout the novel, the theme of escape is much more apparent than it is in *Ragtime*. Conversely, it is easier to perceive regression as a means of escape in *Ragtime* than it is to see it in *A Farewell to Arms*. "Henry's escape thus points to survival rather than to moral rebellion" (Bluefarb 85).

Henry is an ambulance driver for the Italian army during World War I. When Catherine Barkley, an English nurse and his future lover, asks why he joined the Italian army since he is an American, he responds, "I was in Italy and I spoke Italian" (Hemingway 22). "He follows and gives orders as required, but hardly as a consequence of patriotism or dedication to any cause" (Bloom 97). Henry feels no need to flee from the war until he falls in love with Catherine Barkley. Bluefarb describes this flight in *The Escape Motif in the American Novel*.

In this novel of love and war, Catherine Barkley represents the escape from war into love and into life. Henry's love for Catherine "...not only is an integral part of the pattern of escape but its very nature and the circumstances under which it takes place, serves to highlight the death and futility of the war itself; for in love there is at least the possibility of a renewal of life. And certainly by its very nature, even in the most hopeless periods of trial and flight, there is hope. The violence of the war only serves to point up the precious fragility of the love between Lieutenant Henry and nurse Catherine Barkley. Thus, though it may sound like a callous judgment, Henry's love for Catherine in its initial stages at least—is another form of escape from the wars violence and sterility; more, it is a counterpart (or counterpoint) to that violence and sterility" (Bluefarb 88-9).

Unlike Henry, who runs away from war to reach his future, Mother's Younger Brother runs toward war to escape his past. They are both representative of Doctorow's and Hemingway's theme of how different characters react to their desire to escape. Although Younger Brother, Walker, and Houdini cannot escape from life to a concrete place, Henry does have this option of completing Sinclair Lewis' "passionate escape." His desire is to escape the war. He achieves mentally in doing so by falling in love with Catherine. However, this is simply his way of forgetting about the war. *A Farewell to Arms* deals with a mental escape within a larger escape, through which Henry physically absconds the war.

Although Henry's escape is a microcosmic example of the larger escape (or retreat) of the Italian army, it is paradoxically the great escape of the novel; for in that escape both the larger escape—the Caporetto retreat—and the entire senselessness of the war itself are made concrete. Just as the larger escape represents panic on a mass scale, so Henry's smaller escape represents the powerful instinct for self-preservation. Thus when Henry makes up his mind to flee, it is not so much his mind that determines his action as it is the instinct to survive. Instinct is the impelling force here (Bluefarb 89).

A particular nurse, Miss Van Campen, realizes that Henry no longer wishes to fight in the war after he has been injured. She accuses him of purposely landing himself in the hospital to avoid the war front. "I suppose that you can't be blamed for not wanting to go back to the front. But I should think you would try something more intelligent than producing jaundice with alcoholism." She goes on to say, "I have known many men to escape the front through self-inflicted wounds" (Hemingway 144).

Henry is eventually released from the hospital. Next, during his retreat to Caporetto, he serves as a "moral policeman." He stops his men from looting and shoots one of the sergeants who refuses to help remove their ambulance which is lodged in mud. "Frederic sticks to his mission and his men up to the point when he must either escape or be executed" (Bloom 104). Henry does not want to die like Younger Brother. He wants to survive and find Catherine to feel the relief of escaping the war both mentally and physically. When he is faced with either the option of escape or execution, he chooses escape, even though it may be fatal. He refuses to give up survival. Hemingway describes his choice in the novel: "I looked at the carabinieri. They were looking at the newcomers. The others were looking at the colonel. I ducked down, pushed between the two men, and ran for the river, my head down. I tripped at the edge and went in with a splash" (Hemingway 327).

Finally, Henry eludes the Italian army permanently. He lives with Catherine in Switzerland where, he tells the reader, they have a fine life. Hoping to leave behind his identity of taking part in the war, Henry grows a beard and wears civilian clothes. His escape or "separate peace" (Bradbury 59) is a success until it is somewhat hindered by the death of Catherine and the stillbirth of their child. Here he realizes the finality of death, as Houdini learns by trying to spiritually contact his deceased mother. But Henry is not like the characters of *Ragtime*. His means of escape is not death, it is love. He avoids his own death throughout the novel aspiring a life with Catherine. When she and the baby die, he accepts it. "That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you" (Hemingway 327). The reader understands that Henry can escape the hardships of reality since he is able to retell his story. Although his means of escape is taken away from him, he continues to live and endures his flight through his memories. Through characters like Frederic Henry, Mother's Younger Brother, and Coalhouse Walker, Jr. and the historical figure of Harry Houdini, the reader learns that the necessity of escape is dealt with differently depending upon the conditions of the situation. Hemingway and Doctorow portray a variety of means and outcomes of escape and also demonstrate a similarity: regression as a path to part from reality. As Richard Todd wrote in *Atlantic Monthly*, "we are all trapped in history, whose patterns are sad and nefarious—though they are also rather exhilarating and swell, since they exonerate us from small duties" (Todd 96). The use of this theme is best described by Doctorow himself (in reference to Houdini): "Today, nearly fifty years since his death, the audience for escape is even larger" (Doctorow 8).

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